

Ray Hanna AFC and Bar



'The best display pilot of his generation.'
'The most talented pilot in the history of display flying.' *'He was my role model.'*
'I became a pilot after watching him fly.'
'The best Spitfire pilot since the war.'

Such were the phrases which echoed around the aviation world when the sad news broke that aviation had lost one of its finest and most respected pilots.

Squadron Leader Ray Hanna, who established the Red Arrows as the world's premier formation aerobatics team, completed what turned out to be his last display season in the position in which he finished his first 40 years ago – at the very top. No mean feat at the age of 77.

Ray was already an outstanding fighter pilot with noted aerobatics talent and considerable experience in squadron formation teams when an official RAF aerobatics display team was formed in 1965. He was selected for the team and, within a year, was the Leader.

His leadership brought a style and panache into displays which took the Red Arrows to new heights of excellence which earned worldwide acclaim. He was given two more aircraft and his *'Diamond 9'* remains the team's 'signature' formation.

The highlights of previous and contemporary formation aerobatics displays, here and abroad, were achieved at the expense of intervals of empty sky while the team repositioned. Hanna's underlying philosophy was that each manoeuvre should flow seamlessly into the next or, as he often told his team: *'If the crowd have time to lick their ice creams, we aren't doing our job properly!'*

It worked. The Red Arrows almost instantly became a star attraction across the world. Today's displays still conform to the template he developed, and subsequent leaders freely admit the premier position the team still holds is largely due to the solid foundation he laid in the 1960s.

Ray epitomised the qualities required in an aerobatics team leader. Outstanding flying skill, impeccable judgment and decisive orders earned the total confidence of the team members.

His radio instructions during thrilling displays were the quintessence of quiet authority. A pilot who flew under Ray in those early days, and led the team himself a decade later, says: *"Ray had an instinctive feel for display flying. His exceptional flying ability and air of calm confidence inspired us to follow him without question. We had complete trust in him."*

The Red Arrows Squadron motto *'Eclat'* (conspicuously brilliant) could not be used more appropriately than to describe Ray's skills

and professionalism.

There was the occasional brush with higher authority who felt some manoeuvres were a little too punchy, but Ray stood his ground well and usually persuaded the Air Marshals that they were carefully designed to look exciting but were actually quite safe.

Ray served a record four years as 'Red One'. In recognition of his exceptional leadership of what quickly became (and is today) the public face of the RAF, he was awarded a Bar to the AFC he had received seven years earlier for outstanding airmanship as a fighter pilot.

Raynham George Hanna was born at Takapuna, New Zealand, on the 28th August 1928. He learned to fly Tiger Moths after leaving Auckland Grammar School and, in 1949, worked his passage on a steamer to England in the hope of joining the RAF.

Earning his Wings before piston-engine fighters were superseded, he flew such types as the Tempest, Sea Fury and Beaufighter. That began a passion which was to give pleasure to millions later in his life.

During his service, he flew virtually all the early British jet fighters. His first operational posting to 79 Squadron at RAF Gutersloh was an unprecedented achievement for a pilot of limited experience. Flying the Meteor in the fighter reconnaissance role was one of the most demanding for a single-seat pilot. *"Four years never above 100 feet"*, as he fondly described it, enabled him to hone a skill which was to enthral spectators, and earn the respect of other pilots, for decades.

In 1969, after conspicuous success leading the Red Arrows he was, incomprehensibly, posted to a ground tour. For a man born to fly, a 'desk job' was unbearable. He resigned. 1971 saw the start of a new career in civil aviation. After seven years as a captain with Cathay Pacific, he became Chief Pilot of a diplomatic organisation with world-wide operations, where he remained until retirement.

Ray's Red Arrows years were only the beginning of his enormous contribution to British display flying. For three more decades, he commanded universal respect in the civilian airshow world internationally.

In the 1970s, he was invited to display MH434, the famous Mk IX Spitfire which he later acquired. It was the beginning of a long relationship between man and machine which will remain for ever in the memories of his many admirers.

Ray never showed off his ability; he always showed off the capability of whichever aircraft he displayed. Alex Henshaw MBE, Chief Test Pilot at Supermarine's largest wartime Spitfire factory, considered him to be the finest Spitfire pilot in the world. *"Of all the displays I've seen since the war, no other pilot had Ray Hanna's ability to demonstrate precisely what the Spitfire was designed to do."*

In 1981, Ray's son Mark, a Phantom pilot, left the RAF to join him in founding the Old Flying Machine Company, restoring and operating WWII 'warbirds' at Duxford. Mark was already an experienced and exceptionally talented pilot and their performances on the international display circuit led to their being in regular demand by film-makers.

Breathtaking flying sequences in *Empire of the Sun* (1987) and *Memphis Belle* (1989) led to numerous film credits, and to Stephen Spielberg insisting their services be engaged for his film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).



Father and son enjoyed a mutual and justified respect and pride. Ray's obvious delight when Mark earned his Wings is still vividly remembered by those rehearsing for the graduation parade. They were treated to a spectacular demonstration of flying skill.

The distinctive sound of a Merlin engine was quickly followed by Ray's Spitfire appearing at an impressive angle of bank from around a hanger and 'slaloming' at speed through the dispersal floodlight pylons before making an extremely low pass in front of the hangars. Unthinkable these days but, significantly, it was executed with his characteristic precision and safety – and away from public view.

Mark's tragic death in 1999, in a flying accident which Ray witnessed, was a devastating blow. The public courage and fortitude with which he coped with his private pain, and gradually returned to his flying form to continue the project they began, earned him widespread admiration.

Ray's skills were sublime and his professionalism absolute. His mastery of the display pilot's art went far beyond his legendary handling skills; he knew how to display. When Ray spoke other pilots listened. When he flew, other pilots watched. His skills and finesse were the target for which all others aimed.

His ability to fly war machines exceptionally low with safety and precision invariably evoked rapturous applause during airshows. A few hours later, as the show drew to a close, the same spectators would watch in total silence, with tears in many an eye, as Ray in his Spitfire performed the most graceful aerial ballet. Shrewd organisers of shows with a military theme ensured his was the closing display.

He was a gentleman; impeccably courteous, of absolute integrity and unfailingly loyal to his friends. His dry sense of humour occasionally caught out even those who knew him well but, with perfect timing, his twinkling half smile revealed what he really thought.

Ray wasn't afraid to stand his ground when necessary and, although never impolite, wasn't afraid to be blunt when occasion demanded – the latter often not unrelated to his profound dislike of bureaucracy!

Although intolerant of all but the highest standards, he was a kind man who willingly gave his time to advise the less experienced and encourage aspiring pilots achieve their ambition. Countless pilots who never actually met him were inspired to fly by seeing his displays as youngsters.

An approachable man of great modesty, Ray remained totally unaffected by the immense esteem in which he was held. – *Tudor Owen*

Ray Hanna died suddenly on December 1. He is survived by Eunice, whom he married in 1957, and their daughter Sarah. He was buried beside Mark at the Parish Church, Parham, Suffolk, on the 15th December.

**A memorial service for Ray Hanna will be held at noon on March 2nd at the Church of the Royal Air Force, St Clement Danes, Strand, London WC2 ■*